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Serpentine avenue of trends

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Happenings in the air: India with 6.9% growth rate, second highest in the world after China's 8.9%, is exhibiting extraordinary miscellany. The gradual shift of economic power from West to East is becoming evident when you hear of growth 1.6%, 1.5%, 1.4%, 0.8% and minus 1% of USA, Germany, France, UK and Japan respectively. Developed nations are grappling with recession and steep unemployment. Something positive is in the air in India, you won't believe the entrepreneurship among young working class people. They're not waiting for Government to give them jobs.

In my nonstop research interactions with people in different social layers I find their differences are becoming spectacular and really juicy. The mobile phone and motorbike have become most valuable in money-making for 20 to 30-year-olds in macro-rural areas (70-100 kms from cities). Young professionals like electricians, TV repairmen, plumbers, mechanics and masons in macro-rurals are criss-crossing a large circumference to service their customers. They are working hard, earning more and placing enjoyment as an agenda to be fulfilled. Acquiring an experimenting mindset, their caste prejudices are quickly vanishing. A low-caste barber's job is

viewed as lucrative business. The simple haircut for men has become serpentine. You can charge differently for full hair colour, streaked look, gel finish, curly effect. The post-cut massage has segregated costs too for only head, or neck-shoulder-arms, or extended-to-back. Specialisation is clearly the name of the game.

Digital livelihood: The stolid kirana shop, those about 10 million mom&pop grocery stores dotting the length and breadth of India selling daily needs, is changing when handled by the young. Following digital trends, young kiranawalas are proving that virtual power provides better livelihood with services non-existent before. In macro-rurals they are buying R18,000 computers to download all types of music and cinema, from Bollywood to Hollywood. They even have a global collection of pornography. Their open sales talk with knowledge about different kinds of sex acts and exciting virtual fare they're peddling will make porn-watching Karnataka legislators look innocent. For R 30 the kiranawala will fill 2GB space to the brim with porno, movies, songs. If you only have R10, don't fret. That's worth one movie or three songs. Their consumers are the local Zap generation below 30 years.

Most striking in this new trend is India's 360-degree shift from a conserving society to becoming consumption-oriented. When I asked how they store what they buy in the R2500 Nokia mobile phone which supports 32 GB only, or even cheaper Chinese mobiles that support 16 GB space, they replied they delete everything after two-three times usage. This delete action

means throwing money into the dustbin. This is real change. It reminds me of a story a Bengali friend narrated about how a Licence Raj banker, after returning from higher education in England, was given a Director's position, and he eulogised about bank automation through computer usage. Employees felt happy when he said everybody can now discard their huge piles of paper. The Director ended his speech saying, "Before throwing away all old documents, keep a photocopy at least." From such a savings mentality to today's throw-away outlook, it's certainly been a long journey.

Lipstick is like wall paint: In 1996 when I modernised Lakme brand, 25 to 30-year-old Indian women consumers had said that Lakme is the only brand that understands Indian skin and beauty. They'd attend the research sessions wearing bright lipstick, but this generation has become old fashioned now. Today's urban young girls below 30 years loathe lipstick. They say it's sticky, over-painted, theatrical, vanishes when you eat, reminds them of mother's generation, and doesn't match their attire. They prefer lip gloss only. This new trend is exclusively Indian, not happening anywhere else in the world. Just to give an idea, Western Europe generates \$6 billion per year from lipstick alone, whereas India sells only \$81 million (R400 crore) lipsticks, of which 20% is lip gloss. This breakthrough trend doesn't mean Indian women aren't alert about looking good. From the language of their body hugging and revealing apparel you can observe how conscious they are of a sexy representation. About 15-20 years ago when the prevalent sari covered everything, you couldn't gauge a girl's figure. Today her dressing style demarcates her body shape.

Gold is yellow metal: These same young women have created another disruption in beauty. Earlier, possessing gold jewelry was the biggest craze, to show-off, indicate status, wealth and family tradition.

This trend has disappeared among the young. They call it yellow metal, and find it monotonous, traditional, the older woman's fashion, not for them. Just to satisfy parents at family gathering and weddings, they wear it but are uncomfortable. Artificial jewelry is trendy for them, far superior to mix-n-match with their dress. Enormous choice in artificial jewelry helps them change their mood, fantasize, and surprise everyone around them. If you look at their dressing drawer, you'd be pleasantly surprised. They continuously buy artificial jewelry. In the West I've heard women use artificial jewelry for the cost factor, but they still admire gold.

Quantity vs economy: This young generation is not only changing trends but changing usage pattern too. Their consumption, in terms of both quantity and variety, of face and body lotion or cream is very high compared to their mothers. A pot of cream the mother uses for three months, the daughter will finish in a fortnight. They rationalise this by saying they are working girls exposed to pollution outside so they have to protect their skin's smoothness. The manufacturer of course is joyous, per capita growth is unlimited in future.

In the West, collective trend forecast has been organised industry's business model, but India's business houses are yet to develop this practice. In so many different layers of society so many things are happening like a serpentine avenue. If as a manufacturer you're not curious, you don't look out for the latent trend, you may lose out.

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